

LEVI-STRAUSS: “The Structural Study of Myth”

Commentator: Dustin Garlitz

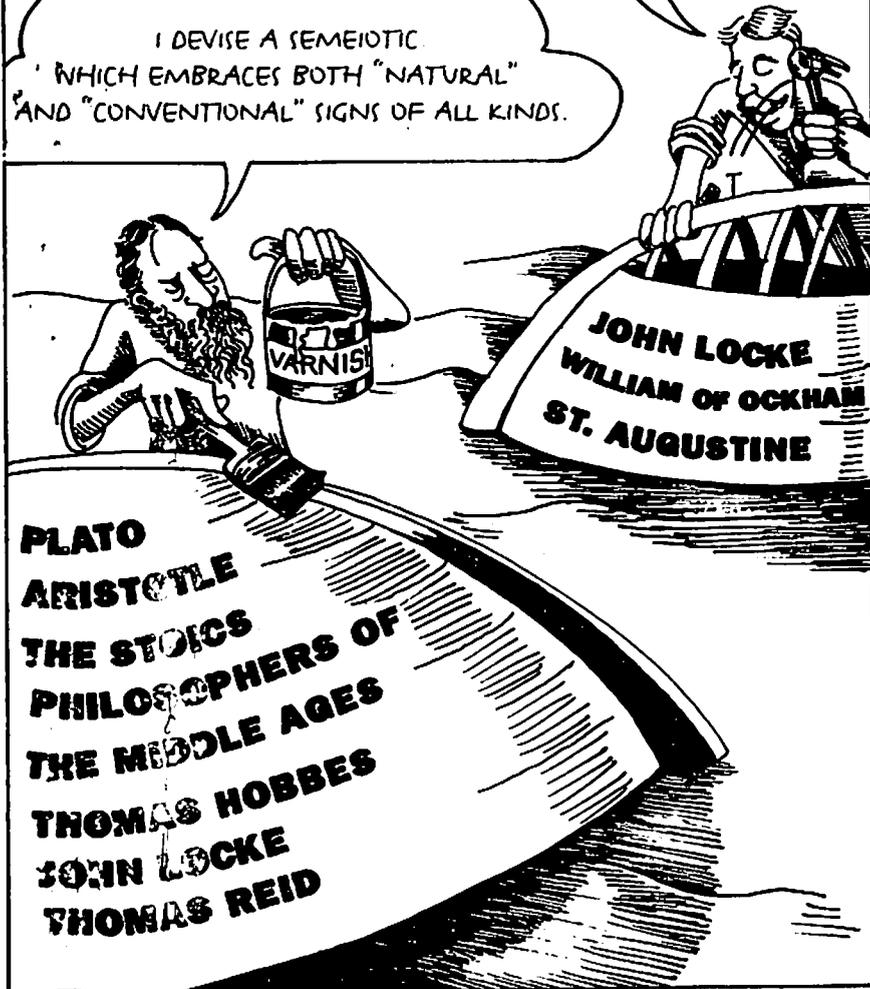
- Mythology is one of the most unique yet most contested aspects of religious thought.
- Levi-Strauss owes much debt to Durkheim’s study *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which looks at Totemism amongst Brazilian natives.
- Levi-Strauss argues that recent scholars have interpreted myth as social phenomena, whereas it was once thought to be an outgrowth of the natural world.
- Why are myths so similar across different cultures?
- “Ancient philosophers reasoned about language the way we do about mythology.”
- Myth can be seen as the third structural element of language, following “langue” (the structure) and “parole” (individual words or statements).
- Levi-Strauss gives the example of the French Revolution, and explains how historians have interpreted it differently; “a sequence of past happenings” which “infers future developments”. Here is the foundation behind the concept of a double structure- both historical and ahistorical- where myth emerges as a third, distinct entity. Myth calls for an explanation in the context of language.
- Myth is essentially a ‘bricolage’ of cultural elements
- “Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level”. Language is the launching pad for such complex cultural inquiry.
- “Mythemes” (pg. 838) are the smallest component parts of a myth. Mary Klages (University of Colorado at Boulder) comments that these parts serve as the narrative of the myth. Meaning is arrived only by differences within a system.
- Synchronic/Diachronic explanation, in part inspired from Louis Markos (Houston Baptist University): synchronic seeks vertical meaning; diachronic is horizontal. Marx: diachronic...change/evolution over time; Structuralists like Saussure: synchronic...“freeze the system and look at it vertically” to see what it means.
- Myth reads both horizontal and vertical on the Cartesian coordinate system. Pack of cards interpreted horizontally (diachronic) by most people, yet Levi-Strauss looks at it vertically (synchronic). There is a hidden structure within system: each row has the same card in a different suit. 4 horizontal columns yet 13 vertical rows...Levi-Strauss looks to synchronic hidden structure of sameness and difference.
- Mythic structures are wide in scope...there is structure present in all forms of storytelling and ordinary life. Oedipal myth can be broken down into structural function categories relating to various things like blood relations and the killing of monsters, etc. (Levi-Strauss breaks things down, in this case, into four distinct categories.) Part of the distinction is environmental; we “do not have only one procreator, but a mother plus a father” (pg. 842). Actually, myths are multi-dimensional for Levi-Strauss, not just two or three-dimensional. This structure comes about by “repetition”.
- Classic Levi-Strauss example of synchronic/diachronic distinction: The orchestral score to a composition. The musician in the orchestra reads it line by line, page by page; the conductor, on the other hand, looks at it vertically for harmonic structure.

The work of Peirce and Saussure provides the most obvious reference point for semiotics in the twentieth century.

But there is a link with the past that both thinkers represent.

I MAKE THE STRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE ('LANGUE') THE STARTING POINT FOR ANY PROJECTED STUDY OF SIGNS.

I DEVISE A SEMEIOTIC WHICH EMBRACES BOTH "NATURAL" AND "CONVENTIONAL" SIGNS OF ALL KINDS.



HUMAN SIGNS AND DISCOURSE

THE UNIVERSE PERFUDED WITH SIGNS

And as Peirce and Saussure have their forebears, they have also spawned successors:

KRISTEVA · BAUDRILLARD
FOUCAULT · DERRIDA
LÉVI-STRAUSS
BARTHES

RICHARDS · MORRIS
OGDEN · FISCH
SEBEOK



36 From "Introducing Semiotics"
Paul Copley 1999

Levi-Strauss Question for Class Discussion:

Why is structuralism interdisciplinary in scope; is Levi-Strauss only a spokesman for structural anthropology or for the entire interdisciplinary field of structuralism?

What is the importance of science in structuralism; does structuralism rely too much on the concreteness of natural science?

In the orchestral example, would Levi-Strauss believe that the musician can read the music vertically and horizontal at the same time; do individuals have the capacity to examine the world both ways, simultaneously?

What are the essential differences between Saussure's "phonemes" and Levi-Strauss' "mythemes"; are the theories of Levi-Strauss more an outgrowth of Saussure than Jakobson?

What are the different distinctions between the blood relatives of the Oedipal Myth that Levi-Strauss analyzes; what is the nature of the root words in the fourth category?

Is the nature of structures conscious or unconscious; humanistic or deterministic?

Would we consider Marx to be a proto-structuralist?

Lévi-Strauss says about myth . . .



We have to read not only from left to right, but at the same time vertically, from top to bottom, that is, with an ear for "harmonic" as well as "melodic" correspondences.

Lévi-Strauss gave the different sections of *The Raw and the Cooked* titles borrowed from music. This is in part because he found, when studying the plots of Amerindian myths, that many of them were constructed in a similar way to musical forms such as fugues, sonatas, rondos, toccatas, etc.

From "Introducing Lévi-Strauss"

Boris Wiseman 1998

Lévi-Strauss also developed an historical hypothesis about the relationship of myth and music in Western culture.

During the Renaissance and the 17th century, mythical thought passed into the background of Western thought. But it was also at this time that the great musical styles of Western culture – those which became characteristic of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, embodied in such figures as Frescobaldi, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner – began to emerge.

For Lévi-Strauss, this is no coincidence.



It is exactly as if music had completely changed its traditional shape in order to take over the function – the intellectual as well as the emotive function – which mythical thought was giving up more or less at the same period.

Levi-Strauss: The Structural Study of Myth

By Dustin Garlitz

In “The Structural Study of Myth”, Levi-Strauss develops the concept of mythology as culturally distinct from religious anthropology. He argues that cultural anthropologists have brought the concept of myth into the social and behavioral world, which is further away from the natural and “cosmological” sphere in which it originated. This is questionable to me because I was under the impression that structuralism was more deterministic (natural and cosmological) rather than humanistic (social and behavioral). Louis Markos of Houston Baptist University makes a similar deterministic claim in the “Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition” lecture series on Levi-Strauss and Structuralism.

Further in the Richter anthology, Levi-Strauss makes the claim that myth is simply just a way to channel repressed emotional tension. If this is the case, I would like for him to attempt to explain why myths have a similar inner structure across disparate cultures. Does this mean that each culture is channeling similarly repressed emotions? To borrow from Jungian analysis, do we all have a similar inherent archetypal structure in our souls? Paired with different environmental factors, I think this inner content of the soul creates different cultural landscapes yet shows its same true colors across the gambit of myths.

One thing that questioned me was that on page 837 of the Richter text, Levi-Strauss makes the claim that myth is an essential part of language, yet later in his essay he makes the argument that myth is the third distinct note of the language triad (langue-parole-myth). I am a little confused by these contradicting statements. Is myth a distinct phenomenon, or is it characteristically embedded in language? I think Levi-Strauss is right on track, on the other hand, when he makes the point that language is a type of foundation for rich, culturally complex myth. Because of this brilliance of this point, I am inclined to say that myth is BOTH a distinct phenomenon and characteristically embedded in language.

I like on pg. 838 how Levi-Strauss mentions the French Revolution example of historic sequence of events. There are both “past happenings” and “future developments” within the varied analyses developed from scholars on this issue. This is the heart of the Straussian “double structure” conception of external events throughout cultures. Levi-Strauss says there are “historical” and “ahistorical” factors that complement myth in this case. Yet Levi-Strauss makes this issue perplexing by ending with the statement that “myth is language, functioning on an especially high level” (pg. 838). This strikes me as another extension of the contradicting view that myth is distinct while also reliant on language.

The centerpiece of the Levi-Strauss article is the concept of “mythemes”, or individual units of narrative behind a myth. This is where Levi-Strauss exhibits his debt to Saussure’s structural linguistics. My question concerns how much of Jakobson is found in the mytheme view of the world. Are mythemes only small parts of a continual narrative, or can they be extended to actual human action? Are mythemes really as complex as Levi-Strauss writes, or can they speak for the very fundamental structures of our linguistic world?

My favorite part of the essay is when Levi-Strauss starts to explain the synchronic/diachronic distinction in structures. The best example is an orchestral score, which can be read horizontally (diachronic) - from line to line, page to page- as well as vertically (synchronic) - which relates to harmonic integration. Professor Markos makes the claim in his lecture on Structuralism that Saussure and Levi-Strauss are most concerned with “freezing” the vertical structure and looking for similarity and differences. Therefore it can be inferred that the more traditional (pre-Structuralist) view is to examine things horizontally (diachronically), and look at their differences throughout a linear time component. Marx is heavily coming out of this more traditional view; Levi-Strauss breaks with tradition in his structuralist type of synchronic analysis. It can be said, though, that the vertical dimension was always there, it just was hidden throughout time.

The section of the essay that I least understood was the one relating to the Oedipal myth. From what I do understand, Levi-Strauss was able to break down the Oedipal myth to four distinct, functional categories. There is a break between, for example, relations of blood relatives (Oedipus and Jocasta) and killing monsters (dragon and Sphinx). I don't understand the breaking down of Greek roots in the fourth functional category that Levi-Strauss proposes; but I do understand that the system is inherently multi-dimensional (many, if not all myths- across cultures- could be broken down into multiple layers of meaning).

Part of the Levi-Strauss multi-dimensional interpretation of myths has to do with the multiple (rather than single) concept of parenting; we have mothers and fathers rather than just one type of parental authority. This means we interpret myths more than one way, which is closer to Structuralist multi-dimensionality rather than a traditional single layer of meaning.

Back to the synchronic/diachronic duality (which maybe relates to mother/father?), Levi-Strauss cites the example of a pack of cards. The cards are arranged horizontally (13 columns) and vertically (4 rows). Levi-Strauss believes that the Structuralist way to view the cards is by the “four homologous sets consisting of the same units (the individual cards) with only one varying feature, the suit” (pg. 839). My question deals with the visibility of the synchronic way of looking at things over the diachronic. How really hidden is the vertical, structuralist “freezing” of the cards; are the structuralists really as original as we make them out to be?

A lot of what Levi-Strauss is writing about comes out of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Yet I want to know more about the Roman Jakobson connection. Did Levi-Strauss really read Jakobson during his student days, or was he just exposed to his linguistic theories when in residency at the New School for Social Research in New York City? Did Structuralism start from linguistics and then spread to anthropology? What other fields is it part of today; do we have structuralist economists and chemists, and if so, what makes them unique from the rest of their field?